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ABSTRACT

Classroom and laboratory environments typically can provide actual or simulated activities within which most of the technical and creative elements of the media production process can be enacted, but the financial component of production budgeting is often left aside. A "mini-production community" model has been used for the last three years in a third-semester, team-oriented field production course at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. Starting with an estimated budget for each major product, students expend funds ("video dollars") to the school and exchange funds with each other as the "hire" and "hire out" to form production teams. Students typically retain creative control by producing and, in almost all cases, directing their productions. Budgeting is a very pragmatic counterpoint to the aesthetic play and experimentation being encouraged in the course, and punishment and reward through credit loss and gain is needed to motivate compliance with the pragmatic. Subjective observations indicate that students enjoy the activity of hiring and billing, and appreciate more fully the consequences of wasted time and the mercurial nature of production planning and scheduling. (The course syllabus, sample "video dollars," and a "rate card" for the course are attached.) (RS)

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"Microeconomic Modeling"

in a Third Semester Video Production Course

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"Microeconomic Modeling" in a Third Semester Video Production Course

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Classroom and laboratory environments typically can provide actual or simulated activities within which most of the technical and creative elements of the media production process can be enacted, but the financial component of production budgeting is often left aside. Perhaps it is only illustrated in texts and replicated as a lifeless document -- a paper exercise -- appended to the more vital, working pages of a script, storyboard, shot sheet, or EDL. Cameras, editing systems, scripting software, crew, talent, and other physical manipulatives are usually at hand. The financial element is slighted when its appropriate physical manipulatives are not at hand, or when the stages in which these manipulatives would be worked are not integrated into a course's production requirements. In order to teach the budgeting process, tangible and workable budgeting elements must be issued to students along with the customary media production hardware and software tools.

As components in the overall financial process, a preliminary budget serves almost as an initial script or storyboard for spending, with a final budget or accounting report serving as a "final cut". In the execution of a media product, much significant decision-making, creative adaptation, and skill implementation takes place between preproduction planning and final cut. So too there is much that happens between the preliminary budget and the final accounting where money is concerned. As media tools are used in the creation of the physical tape or film, so too are economic tools used in the engagement and maintenance of production activity, and students should be given "hands-on" experience with this as well. In addition to the rather

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static initial and final budget documents, there are the livelier economic manipulatives of currency, credit, rate cards, invoices, and service orders that can be brought to bear as production tools.

Real or Unreal?

There are two general ways of bringing this economic dimension of media production to life within the classroom: take on "real world" media production projects along with their real world cash flows, or create a "microeconomic model" with an artificial form of exchange. The latter is reminiscent of the mini-towns that many youngsters explore when their elementary class or school sets up each student's desk or table as a make-believe business or government establishment. It's a effective means of illustrating the interdependency and dynamics of the community, especially in terms of economics, resources, and consumption. Setting up a mini-production community model for college students might seem a little regressive, but this method has several advantages when compared to the first option of working with real world projects: students develop their own project concepts, the dollar amounts being manipulated are realistic and accurately reflect professional rates, and projects are much more likely to be equivalent in challenge, resources, and control for all students.

Using real world projects as the vehicle for demonstrating the realities of production economics has some merit; students work for actual clients with actual deadlines and may be fortunate enough to have money coming into the project which can be used to pay for access to equipment that the school can't afford to own. However, the drawbacks to utilizing outside project work are also worth noting. First of all, schools are usually approached in the first place because something is wanted for nothing, or nearly nothing. This will immediately preclude any professionally

representative and realistic budgeting since the students will be working for free or for a pittance and the school will be surrendering use of its media resources for a similarly unreal compensation.

Additionally, clients looking for cheap labor and facilities are most often either non-profit entities without funds and with little if any awareness of how much they are really asking for "as a favor", or they are unscrupulous bottom-feeding semi-professionals looking for people and places to exploit. The major, prestigious non-profit agencies, even those with modest but realistic media budgets, already enjoy excellent pro bono production contributions from agencies and production houses as a matter of course, and so are less inclined to contact more poorly equiped and staffed university programs. As for the profit industries, most established media professionals seem to prefer giving students real-world opportunities by sponsoring internships coordinated through the university, rather than by hiring students (especially for key crew positions) for random, one-time-only projects.

Finally, it is impossible to assure students that all outside client experiences will be equivalent and equitable. Some projects will be a good experience and some will be pure victimization. (While the same can sometimes be said of internships, an internship coordinator can track the merits and outcomes of each internship as reported by both sponsor and student, and a history can then be complied and referred to when setting up future placements.) Outside clients can often provide excellent outside-of-class project experiences, but in light of the unpredictable nature and uneven outcomes provided by outside projects, a stable learning experience that can meet clearly defined and constant objectives cannot be expected from this venue.

The Method

The mini-production community model, then, provides project equivalency and realistic dollar amounts, and retains student creative control. It is this model that has been used for the last three years in a third-semester, team-oriented field production course at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. In their first two semesters of video production at UMKC, students work primarily on instructor assigned or rotation-system determined teams, and the objectives of these courses center to a great extent on the how-to pragmatics of basic video and audio production technology and methods.

The third semester course, Video Directing, leaves team formation up to the students, and the learning of hardware ceases to be a major focus. The tracking and budgeting of "video dollars" within a simulated media community compels attention to pragmatic values and teamwork in a course whose primary objectives are to test and apply aesthetic concepts as presented in Zettl's esoteric *SightSoundMotion*, the primary text for this course (see syllabus, Appendix A). Attention to cash flow and scheduling, rather than technology operation and methodology, becomes the "hard facts" anchor of the course. While budgeting processes have been examined in other courses, this becomes the first actual implementation and "testing" of an active, student devised and maintained budget plan.

Some degree of instructor advisement and control over team formation is exerted in most of our courses where team-based projects are required. This is usually necessary to insure that all students are given fair access to responsibilities and opportunities for expression. By their third semester, however, production students have begun to recognize their own strengths and role preferences, and to appreciate the differing skills and

temperaments of others who must fill complementary roles. Within the artificial economic community, the need to hire and be hired and to transduce all available money into onscreen values tends to diminish "best-buddy" team formations -- allowing each individual student to hire out their own special skills and talents -- and further signifies to students the real-world worth of various production elements and of their own human talents.

The "budget tools" typically consist of $3,500 in "video dollars" (play money -- Appendix B), a rate card for "rentals" of school-owned shooting and editing resources (based on local market production house and equipment rental rates -- Appendix C), examples of basic invoice forms, and a list of suggested personnel rates. However, it isn't necessary to have printed currency to handle as long as some method of tracking the transfer of "funds" is employed.

Starting with estimated budgets for each major project, students expend funds to the school and exchange funds with each other as they "hire" and "hire out" to form production teams. "Hiring out" becomes the means of acquiring additional funds to support more elaborate production efforts and cover exigencies. After production completion, the actual expenditures are compared to the original budgets. Students are encouraged to spend the full amount issued and earned in order to produce the best possible product . . . the one with the most money left over at the end usually has the weakest product. (It is also easier to berate a student for "not spending enough" than for being lazy and undermotivated . . . it's more obtuse and less humiliating, but ultimately states the same point.)

Results to Date -- Team building

The amount of currency put into circulation appears to have an influence on the amount of team interaction; an excess of cash makes hiring out to earn extra funds less imperative. The amount to be doled out, then, shouldn't be too much more than that which is expected by the instructor to be irrecoverably lost to the department for equipment and editing system rental. This amount would be estimated by the instructor on the basis of the project requirements for the course. I tend to use the overly simplistic and highly problematic "one hour on location and one hour editing for each finished minute" rule of thumb. Students exceeding expectations in the scope or complexity of their projects (or who waste time) start beating the bush for more work on other projects in order to cover their growing outlays.

As expected, students in this third semester course often have established particular for-hire roles for themselves. Each student necessarily is their own producer, but storyboarding/scripting, editing, lighting, audio, and videography are functions that become specialities. To date, everyone has retained creative control by producing and, in almost all cases, directing.

Results to Date -- Budget Maintenance

It is obvious that budget reporting must be a graded activity. Very few students enjoy record-keeping, especially in a class with production emphases and project objectives centered on *SightSoundMotion*'s "Zettlian" aesthetics. Budgeting is a very pragmatic counterpoint to the aesthetic play and experimentation being encouraged in this course, and punishment and reward through credit loss and gain is needed to motivate compliance with the pragmatic. Both sellers and buyers of services need to submit records

to the instructor at scheduled intervals for tallying, and that includes the instructor's submission of bills to students for equipment and editing system rentals. A breakdown in this paper trail discipline quickly sets the tone for anarchic, undocumented bartering!

It also appears that class size has an effect on the conscientiousness of students in regard to recording transactions. Enrollments of six or less encourages a great deal of informality in the working relationships between students, and again a bartering mood will manifest itself. In a small group, billing each other for services may feel akin to billing a family member for doing the dishes or feeding the cat. Performance can be enforced, but it may appear excessively regimented. The artificial economic community needs to be large enough for students to feel independent, like a community of benignly competitive vendors, rather than interdependent, like a commune of employees working within the same media department.

Conclusion

Subjective observations indicate that students rather enjoy the activity of hiring and billing, and appreciate more fully the consequences of wasted time and the mercurial nature of production planning and scheduling. The activity of adjusting budgets, filing transactional reports -- the paperwork -- is far less enthusiastically engaged in. This is where the motivational magic of crediting is needed, and where a schedule of reporting either in stages or upon completion of a project must be defined and followed. It is clear that, regardless of the effort needed to keep the paperwork flowing, setting up a dynamic system of value tracking does indeed illustrate and enforce among students the economic value of their time and media talents and of the resources consumed. Students retain more accurate estimations of the prevailing rates for production services and freelance compensation.

Appendix A -- Course Syllabus

COURSE: **TELEVISION DIRECTING 470**
(Field and Studio)

PREREQUISITES: ComS courses 270, 351 and 370
REQUIRED TEXT: H. Zettl, Sight Sound Motion
SUGGESTED TEXT: Mathias & Patterson, Electronic Cinematography
INSTRUCTOR: Gregory Gutenko 235-2729 (office)
341-0367 (home)

COURSE OBJECTIVES:
- To introduce and explore a range of key æsthetic and critical considerations that are essential to the creative production and direction of studio and on-location video programming.
- To examine future trends in video production methods and technology and their influence on the video profession, including renewed practices in film origination and non-linear computer editing.
- To review relevant theory and research in media æsthetics.

GRADING: I will be measuring your learning primarily on the basis of *demonstrated* abilities in producing and directing, and this activity is evaluated in the production grades, and will determine 65% of your final course grade. Conventional tests (quizzes and examinations) will be used to determine the remaining 35% of your course grade.

There will be two *comprehensive examinations*, one at midterm and one during finals week. Each exam will constitute just under a third of the examination grades (or 10% of the course grade). The remainder of the examination grades is earned through at least five short *quizzes* covering the most recent information that has been presented in the lectures or text readings.

Production grades are derived from your applied studio and field production activity. Each person will produce and direct two on-location acquired, edited major *Production Projects*, and plan and direct six minor *studio exercise* production "setups" during regular class sessions. The production grades will also be determined by your work as a crewmember on other students' projects--both in-studio and on location--and will be the most significant means of evaluating *class participation*.

A *paper*, worth up to 15% of the course grade, is optional and can be used to substitute for the weaker components of your course evaluations.

The breakdown of these evaluation components is overleaf:

Breakdown of course evaluation components:	Quizzes	15%
	Midterm exam	10%
	Final Exam	10%
	Production One	15%
	Production Two	20%
	Studio Exercises	15%
	Participation	15%

ATTENDANCE No assessments are based on attendance *per se*, but (obviously) missing quizzes, crew positions, and content information will take their toll in their own right. Unannounced absences on crew will cause serious disruptions of production sessions. Such neglect of responsibility towards a team effort is tantamount to failure to show up for work. Unexcused crew absences will earn an "F" for that session, and will not be recoverable.

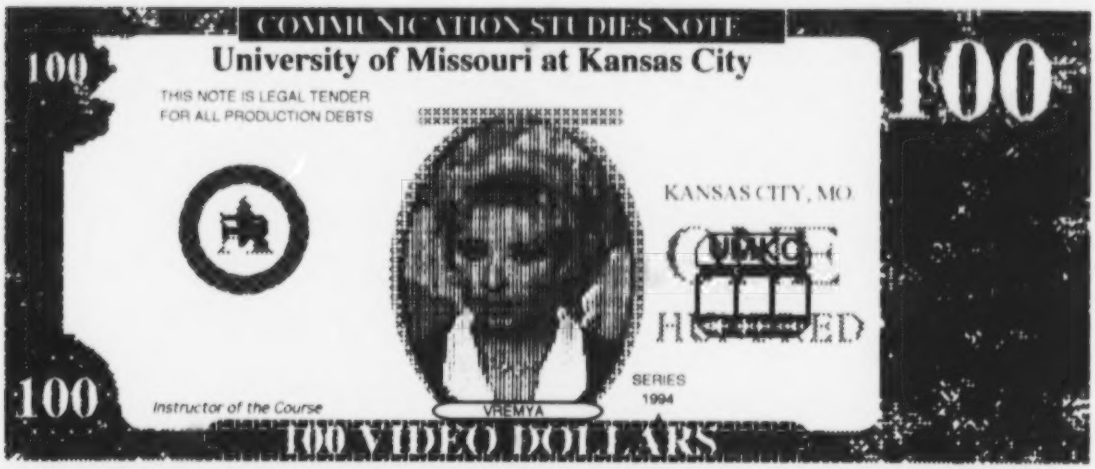
BUDGETING Obviously, quality location video production requires an experienced crew. You can't do much on your own, if only because two heads are always better than one. You need your crew, and you need to be available on crew. This class requires a great deal of outside activity time. Be resigned to it. Be prepared for it. There is no way out of it. **Budget your time!**

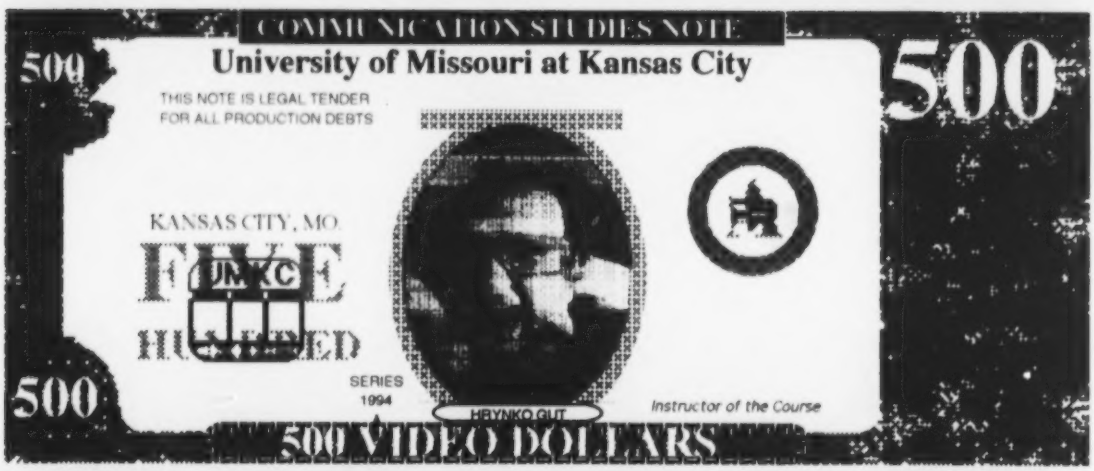
In addition, in order to take advantage of special individual skills that may be possessed by each of you, the buying and selling of your skills and expertise in specific roles is required. You will all be functioning in your *class participation* activities as freelancers...professionals for hire. This is what the RATE CARD and the VIDEO DOLLARS are for--to track what you have to spend to produce your videos and to earn the dollars to hire others. Otherwise, you'll be working alone, and <u>your video will look like it</u>!

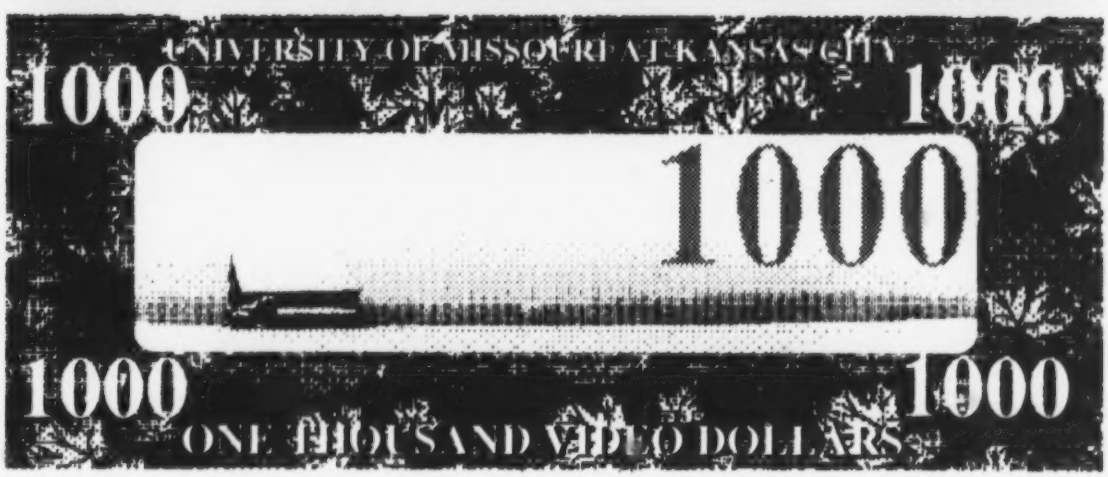
You will need to run a budget on all your productions, and issue invoices for all work performed by you for another. Rates are negotiable. All budgets and invoices must be submitted as part of your project work. So, **budget your money!**

You may recruit crew from the ComS 270 Fundamentals of Video class, and handle them as "interns", meaning that you will not pay them, but will submit an "extra credit" report to me.

Appendix B -- Video Dollars







Appendix C -- Rate Card

COURSE: Television Directing 470 (Field and Studio)

RATE CARD

EQUIPMENT & FACILITIES	PER HOUR	or PER DIEM
Panasonic S-VHS Camcorder includes one microphone, XLR cable, one tripod	n.a.	$200
Lighting packages Includes reflectors and gels (color media)	n.a.	$100
Sound packages Microphone mixer, multiple mics and XLR cables	n.a.	$100
Studio (Fine Arts building) Insert stage, lighting grid, and sound recording	$100	n.a.
Post-production Studio (Fine Arts building) Character generator, SEG switcher, studio package	$400	n.a.
Editing system (211 Royall Hall) 3/4 U-matic cuts-only editing	$100	$500

SERVICE & STAFF	PER HOUR	or PER DIEM
"Above the line"		
Director	$500	$2000
Scriptwriter	negotiable per script ($1000~$5000)	
Talent	$500	$2000
"Below the line"		
Videographer	$200	$1000
Location Audio Recordist	$100	$500
Lighting Grip	$100	$500
Gaffer	$50	$300
Storyboard artist	$100	$500
Videotape editor	$100	$500
Studio Technician	$100	$500
Foley Artist/Audio post (sweetening)	$100	$500
Studio Crew	$50	$300
Stock footage/audio research	$100	$400
Bookkeeping	$100	$500
Transportation	$100	$500
Catering	$100	$500
Security	$100	$500